**How does the tool facilitate students’ critical thinking?**

The visual ranking tool facilitates students’ critical thinking primarily through the process of ranking. The process of ranking concepts or items requires students to first understand the concepts under consideration, then distinguish among them, and last put them in a sequence or order. Requesting that students compare, contrast, and sequence represent a Level 2 on Costa’s Levels of Questions (handout from CI 512-Summer 2011). Since the whole activity is on the computer, students can click and drag items to try new orders, which would be much more difficult and timely with paper and pen. Furthermore, allowing students to compare their own rankings against their peers (both individually and collective average) makes it easy for students to obtain an objective comparison between themselves and the class average.

**What are the key steps a teacher must take to set up the Visual Ranking Tool and engage students in using the tool?**

*Develop a Project*. The teacher must choose a project, then name and describe it, provide a prompt for students, and then consider the list of concepts, terms to be ranked.

*Making a List for Students in the Tool*. Using student brainstorming, the class must develop a list of terms to be ranked, which should generally number smaller than 10. After the list is developed and entered online, students will break into teams and log in to their work site.

*Work on the Lis*t. Students should work in their teams to rank the terms. In order to explain their responses, students are welcome to place comments in dialogue boxes next to the terms.

*Compare Lists.* After all teams have finished the ranking, they can compare their ranking to any other team. Hitting the “compare” button provides a correlation coefficient between the two lists, or between a list and the class mean ranking.

*Assess Results.* The teacher can also review each students rankings alone and in comparison with others, as well as the correlation coefficients. Teachers are able to comment on students’ work by means of the “project comment feature”.

**How do the examples stimulate your thinking of how to use the Visual Ranking Tool?**

The visual ranking tool would be a wonderful resource in a wide range of high school social studies classrooms. I am particularly motivated by the unit suggestion where students used the Visual Ranking Tool in smaller groups as a collaborative activity to rank terms and ideas (in this specific case it was responses from community members). By confirming and discussing opinions in a visual manner, students can more easily make their voices heard and make sure that others understand their own preferences in relation to others in the group.

A particular class I would like to use the Visual Ranking Tool in would be a high school history of the Americas course. We could investigate theories of who first discovered the Americas (China, the Vikings, Spain, and others), and then ask students to break into teams to discuss and rank the theories in order of credulity. In this process, I would require students to refer to evidence and research preformed earlier in the unit. The learning target of this activity would be the following: *Students will be able to identify, distinguish, and rank theories of the discovery of the Americas based on primary and secondary evidence.*